

# **FACILITATING ACCESS TO SPORTS FOR PEOPLE IN POVERTY? A STUDY ON LOCAL SOCIAL SPORTS POLICY**

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## **SAMENVATTING**

### **Mensen in armoede toegang bieden tot sport? Een studie naar lokaal sociaal sportbeleid**

Onderzoek heeft aangetoond dat armoede een impact heeft op de kansen voor sportdeelname. Mensen in armoede participeren minder in sport in vergelijking met mensen die gemakkelijk(er) rondkomen. Op Vlaams beleidsniveau werden initiatieven genomen om lokale besturen aan te moedigen tot het promoten en faciliteren van sportdeelname voor mensen in armoede. Het is echter nog onduidelijk in welke mate dit ingang vond op lokaal niveau. In deze studie wordt onderzocht in welke mate lokale sportdiensten momenteel initiatieven nemen om sportdeelname bij mensen in armoede te faciliteren, met welke moeilijkheden sportdiensten worden geconfronteerd om dit doel te bereiken, en in welke mate lokaal sociaal sportbeleid tot stand komt door middel van samenwerkingsverbanden tussen de sportsector enerzijds, en de sociale sector anderzijds. De data zijn afkomstig van het Vlaamse Sportdiensten Panel (2014). De resultaten geven onder meer aan dat de publieke sportsector en de sociale sector nog in grote mate twee “gescheiden” werelden zijn. Het blijkt een uitdaging om de afstand tussen beiden te overbruggen. Aanbevelingen voor verder onderzoek en voor de ontwikkeling van een sociaal sportbeleid worden aangereikt.

### **Trefwoorden**

Armoede, publiek sportbeleid, sociaal beleid, inclusie, lokale samenwerkingsverbanden, lokale sportdienst

## **ABSTRACT**

### **Facilitating access to sports for people in poverty? A study on local social sports policy**

Research has shown that poverty affects the opportunities for practicing sports. People in poverty participate less in sports as compared to people who have no (or less) difficulties to make ends meet. At the Flemish policy level, initiatives have been taken to incite local sports authorities to promote and facilitate sports participation for people in poverty. Yet, it remains unclear how these concerns are being translated to the local level. In this study, it is investigated to what extent local sports authorities currently take initiatives to facilitate participation in sports for people in poverty, what difficulties local sports authorities encounter to reach this goal, and to what extent local social sports policy results from partnerships between sports and the social sector. Data used in this study stem from the Flemish Panel study on Local Sports Authorities (2014). Results indicate, amongst other things, that the sports sector and the social sector are still two “separate” worlds to a large extent, and bridging the gap remains a challenge. Suggestions are offered for further research and for the development of social sports policy.

## **Keywords**

Poverty, sports policy, social policy, inclusion, local partnerships, local sports authorities

## **INTRODUCTION**

In both academic as well as policy discourses, the dominant conception of poverty has changed, shifting the emphasis from material deprivation of the poor towards the inability to fully exercise social, economic and political rights as citizens (Geddes, 2000, p.782; Muffels & Tsakloglou, 2002, p.4). This conceptualisation of poverty as a multidimensional problem affecting participation in society is also reflected in the definition of Vranken (2010, p.1), who defines poverty as “a network of instances of social exclusion that stretches across several areas of individual and collective existence”. Vranken (2010, p.1), furthermore, adds that “it separates the poor from society’s generally accepted patterns of life” and “people in poverty are unable to bridge this gap on their own”. In other words, the concern with poverty as a lack of resources has been complemented with a focus on social exclusion (Room, 1999). In terms of policy, this has subsequently been translated in putting forward social inclusion as a fundamental policy goal (see Atkinson, Cantillon, Marlier & Nolan, 2002; Ferrera, Matsaganis & Sacchi, 2002), implying the potential for positive policy action within an inclusive society (Giddens, 1998; Geddes, 2005). By consequence, poverty and social inclusion, as policy issues, are not limited to “poverty policy” but cover a wide array of policy domains and actors. Tackling poverty requires a multi-dimensional and multi-actor approach (Geddes & Benington, 2001). This is reflected in poverty policy in Belgium as well, including in Flanders. The latter is the context of the present study.

In Flanders, at the start of each term of office, policies to address poverty are summarized in one document called “Vlaams Actieplan Armoedebestrijding” (Flemish Action Plan for Combatting Poverty). This Action Plan comprises all policy objectives with regard to poverty and social exclusion and results from a collaboration between actors from all relevant policy fields. The guiding principle in formulating objectives, is that combatting poverty must be targeted at full social participation, in order for all citizens to fully benefit from their social rights (Flemish Government, 2010, 2015).

In this study, we focus on the realisation of one of these basic social rights, namely participation in leisure, and more particularly sports. Sports as a policy domain has gone through significant changes over recent decades, as sports has come to occupy a more central place in society (Crum, 1991). Sports has become a generally accepted pattern of life, a customary activity (Collins, 2004), or often even normative behaviour (Leemans, 1964; MacDonald, Pang, Knez, Nelson & McCuaig, 2012). As a consequence, the field of sport cannot be disregarded when tackling poverty and social exclusion.

Poverty has reached the sports policy agenda<sup>1</sup> relatively recently in Flanders<sup>2</sup>. At the Flemish policy level, initiatives have been taken that strongly incite local sports authorities<sup>3</sup> to promote and facilitate sports participation for people experiencing poverty. Yet, in Flanders, an evolution towards further decentralisation is currently taking place. The local policy level is being granted more autonomy in different areas, including in the field of sports. By consequence, the ability of the more central, Flemish policy level to determine policies is being eroded. This causes concern among people representing the interests of people in poverty, as they fear poverty and social exclusion will not be put on the local (sports) agenda if there is no top-down pressure to do so (see Network against Poverty, 2015). Therefore, in this study, we will evaluate to what extent social sports policy has found its way into the local level at this stage.

The outline of this article is as follows. In the next section, we explain the aim of this study in more detail. In the subsequent section, the broader policy context is described, after which the data are presented. Then, the empirical results are explored. The last section brings a discussion of the implications of the findings as well as a conclusion.

## RESEARCH AIM

The aim of this study is three-fold. First, as people in poverty are a relatively “new” target group in terms of sports policy, it is explored to what extent local sports authorities currently take initiatives to include people in poverty in sports, and how access for people in poverty is facilitated in the field. As argued by Young (2000), inclusion does not always automatically “happen”, but requires explicit policy attention:

inclusion ought not to mean simply the formal and abstract equality of all members of the polity as citizens. It means explicitly acknowledging social

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<sup>1</sup> When using the term “sports policy”, in this paper, we refer to leisure sports (as opposed to elite sports).

<sup>2</sup> In Belgium, sports are the responsibility of the communities (i.e. the Flemish, the French and the German-speaking community) and not a matter at the national level.

<sup>3</sup> We refer to the “lokale sportdienst” here.

differentiations and divisions and encouraging differently situated groups to give voice to their needs, interests, and perspectives (Young, 2000, p.119).

It is our aim to explore to what extent social diversity is actively taken into account in sports policy, and more specifically poverty. Second, and closely related, it is investigated what difficulties local policy actors encounter concerning the implementation of local social sports policy. The third research aim is related to the cooperation with partners. The role of local sports authorities has changed considerably over the years, with an increased emphasis on networking and partnerships (cf. *infra*). Policies are to be made and implemented in cooperation with the relevant partners, such as other municipal services or non-governmental actors. The staff of local sports authorities can now be considered as boundary spanners, i.e. individuals who have a dedicated job role or responsibility to work in collaborative environments (Williams, 2013, p.19). Yet, Williams (2013) warns that boundary spanners are confronted with complex problems that require specific skills and experience, and paradox, ambiguity and tension are part of reality in their work. Moreover, the field of poverty and social welfare on the one hand, and sports on the other, are very distinct fields, with often little tradition in cooperating with each other. Therefore, the third aim of this study is to explore to what extent a positive cooperation between both sectors, the sports sector and the social sector, is actually taking place.

## **POLICY CONTEXT**

The current study is not only of interest for Flanders, but is of broader, international relevance, as it focuses on a social challenge that many countries are facing. Although the right to practice sports has been recognised since 1975 in the European Sport for All charter (Council of Europe, 1975, 1980), social inequality in sports participation is a widespread problem throughout Europe and beyond (see Van Bottenburg, Rijnen & Sterkenburg, 2005; Hartmann-Tews, 2006; Van Tuyckom & Scheerder, 2010). Specifically with regard to poverty, results from the Eurobarometer indicate a participation rate of 28 percent among people who have difficulties paying the bills most of the time. Among European citizens who do not have difficulties paying the bills, weekly sports participation amounts to 45 percent (European Commission, 2014). Opportunities for sports participation are important for people in poverty, as research has shown that leisure has a clear added value for people in poverty. Examples are the diversion from daily problems, coping with stress, or establishing and experiencing social connections (Bowling, 2002; Scott & McCarville, 2008). Specifically with regard to sports, the literature attributes a large number of benefits to participation, even though scholars also warn that sport should not be seen as a “panacea”, and that the context of the sports practice is a crucial determinant (see Coalter, 2007). In addition, regardless of the potential benefits, providing actual sports opportunities to all citizens is also a matter of social justice.

In Flanders too, there is still a poverty gap in sports participation. Specific figures are rather scarce, but the available evidence shows a considerable cleavage. For example, results from a survey conducted by the Flemish government indicate that 57 percent of people in the lowest income quintile never practice sports, as compared to 44 percent among the third quintile, and 29 percent among the highest quintile (Research Department of the Flemish Government, 2014). When taking subjective

poverty as a measure<sup>4</sup>, calculations based on the Participation Survey indicate an even larger gap (Scheerder, Borgers & Willem, 2015). Sports participation is to be understood in a broad sense here. An activity is considered as sports if it takes place in leisure time, involving some amount of physical activity, and not purely done for utilitarian purposes. No specific level or intensity is required in this approach (Scheerder *et al.*, 2015). Walking or taking a bike ride can therefore be sports as well, as long as the activity itself is the central aim (in contrast to walking or biking to a shop to buy groceries for example).

Whereas poverty itself is an “old” problem, people in poverty can be seen as a relatively “new” target group in sports policy. A “Sport for All” decree issued by the Flemish Government in 2007 was a turning point in sports policy in Flanders, both for local sports policy generally as well as with regard to “social” local sports policy. Concerning the latter, the decree compelled local sports authorities to spend at least 10 percent of the subsidies they received on the accessibility and diversity of their sports provision. This implied a stronger focus on policy initiatives for disadvantaged groups, amongst which people in poverty. The choice for a particular target group was left to the local authorities. However, the target group of people in poverty was brought to the attention of local sports authorities and they were encouraged to take their citizens experiencing hardship on board. Since 2007, the legal framework has changed considerably, with a larger autonomy at the local level, but people in poverty are still considered as a target group in sports policy.

Local sports authorities are in charge of the sports administration at the local level. Traditionally, their core responsibility is the management of sports infrastructure and sports activity. However, apart from sports provision, they also have a role as regulator and coordinator of sports at the local level. Examples are the management and support of sports clubs, but also the support to other sport initiatives, or facilitating unorganised forms of sports participation (through the provision of bark running tracks). The implementation of policies to facilitate and/or encourage the participation of people in a socially disadvantaged situation is part of local authorities’ coordinating and regulating role as well. Over the last decade, the emphasis on their role of regulator and coordinator has gradually been strengthened (Vos, Vandermeersch & Scheerder, 2015).

Cooperation with partners is a necessary requirement for local sports authorities to fulfil this role (Vos *et al.*, 2015). The expectation of working together with partners to accomplish policy objectives has become much stronger as compared to previous decades. The evolution in Flemish sports policy corresponds to a wider, international shift towards local governance and increasing reliance on local partnerships (see Geddes, 2005; Sorrentino & Simonetta, 2012; Williams, 2013). Accordingly, also in terms of local social sports policy, local sports authorities are explicitly expected to develop their policies and initiatives in cooperation with the relevant partners.

## DATA AND METHODS

To answer the research questions of our study, we rely on data from the Flemish Panel study on Local Sports Authorities (Van Poppel, Scheerder & Vandermeersch, 2016), and more particularly on the second wave of data collection. The survey was

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<sup>4</sup> Based on the question whether one has difficulties to make ends meet.

held between June and October 2014. All local sports authorities (i.e. municipalities) in Flanders (N=308) and Brussels (N=19) were invited to complete an online questionnaire on six themes: i) general background information (size, statute, structure,...), ii) developments induced by changes in the legal framework, iii) sports provision (the activities provided, sport for specific target groups, evolution in the number of participants,...), iv) organisation and human resources management, v) accommodation, and vi) cooperation with partners. In this study, we focus on the data with regard to local social sports policy. Respondents are civil servants in charge of sports. In the case of small municipalities, this is usually only one person. In larger municipalities, the questionnaire was sent to the head of the unit. In total, 202 municipalities took part, which corresponds to a response ratio of 62 percent. A comparison with the total population shows that our sample is representative regarding size (number of inhabitants), socio-economic profile, and regional spread. In the current study, we rely on bivariate analyses, which were performed in STATA 12. The findings are presented in the next section.

## **THE IMPLEMENTATION OF LOCAL SOCIAL SPORTS POLICY**

Almost six out of ten local sports authorities (57.7%) organise targeted sports activities for people in poverty, or have taken initiatives specifically for this group. In 2010, this was only two out of ten (21.0%) (Scheerder, Vandermeersch & Van Poppel, 2014). This indicates that the policy impetus initiated at the Flemish policy level has caused significant changes at the local level. Yet, results depend largely on the size of the municipality. In small municipalities, of less than 15,000 inhabitants, the share of municipalities that have organised specific activities is 46 percent, whereas this is 68 and 69 percent in medium-sized municipalities (15,000 to 30,000 inhabitants) and large municipalities (over 30,000 inhabitants) respectively. The association between the development of activities/initiatives and size of municipality is statistically significant ( $p=0,008$ ).

Local sports authorities were also asked whether they undertook initiatives to make general, non-targeted sports activities more accessible for people in poverty. Seven out of ten local sports authorities (70.3%) responded affirmatively. On the other hand, this implies that this is not the case in three in ten municipalities. In one in five local sports authorities (19.5%) policy initiatives to increase sports opportunities for people in poverty – either through targeted activities, or by facilitating access to non-targeted activities – are totally absent.

Local sports authorities that reported to invest in the accessibility of non-targeted initiatives were asked *how* they did this. Respondents could mark several answers at a time. The results are displayed in Table 1. The most common way is a cooperation with the Public Centre for Social Welfare, which is a public sector welfare organisation that exists in every municipality. Second and third in line are systems of discount and providing guidance towards activities organised by local sports authorities.

**Table 1: Ways to facilitate access to non-targeted sports activities for people in poverty**

How?	Total % (N=186)	% among “yes”* (N=141)	N
Cooperation with Public Centre for Social Welfare	66.1	87.2	123
Systems of discount for the sports activities provided by local sports authorities	43.0	56.7	80
Providing guidance towards sports activities provided by local sports authorities	34.9	46.1	65
Systems of discount for club participation	31.7	41.8	59
Providing guidance towards club-organised sports	26.9	35.5	50
Cooperation with a poverty association	18.3	24.1	34
Specific subsidisation for sports clubs	15.1	19.9	28
Training or informing sports clubs	7.5	9.9	14
Other	5.4	7.1	10

\*local sports authorities that indicated to facilitate access to non-targeted sports activities

The findings indicate that the implementation of local social sports policy occurs for a large part outside the framework of club-organised sports. Clubs are rarely “activated” by local sports authorities as agents of change, as only in a small minority of municipalities, information or training about poverty is organised (7.5%) for clubs, and also encouragement through subsidies is rather rare (15.1%).

## **DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED BY LOCAL SPORTS AUTHORITIES**

In order to improve policies and provide adequate support to local sports authorities where necessary, it is of fundamental importance to know what difficulties sports authorities encounter, possibly hindering the implementation of local social sports policy for people in poverty. To evaluate this, a number of potential difficulties were listed in our survey, and respondents were requested to answer on a scale from 1 to 5, from totally disagree to totally agree. In Table 2 below, the mean and standard deviation are given.

The largest problem with regard to the implementation of policies towards people in poverty is a lack of knowledge and expertise. Over half of the local sports authorities (52.1%) agreed or totally agreed with the statement not to have enough knowledge in this regard. Conversely, less than a quarter of the local sports authorities (23.4 %) (totally) disagreed. Knowing how to find people in poverty comes forward as a large problem as well. Over four in ten local sports authorities (43.9%) (totally) agreed with the statement concerned. Based on the mean scores, “no interest from the target group” comes out as the third largest difficulty for local sports authorities. Yet, for this item, over half of the respondents (52.1%) neither agreed nor disagreed.

Approximately one in four (22.9%) local sports authorities (totally) agreed with this statement.

**Table 2: Difficulties for implementing local social sports policy, on a 5-point scale (from totally disagree to totally agree) (N=186)**

<i><b>We experience difficulties to take up the accessibility of sports for people in poverty because...</b></i>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
...we do not have enough knowledge about dealing with this target group	3.3	1.0
...we do not know how to locate the people concerned	3.1	1.1
...there is no interest from this target group	3.0	0.8
...with the same means we can attain more people from other groups	2.8	0.9
...we cannot sufficiently count on other partners	2.7	0.9
...this topic is not a priority	2.7	1.0
...we have insufficient budget to make room for this	2.5	0.9

The other items yield a mean score above 2.5 as well, indicating that all items are of relevance to at least some of the local sports authorities.

Faced with the diversity among local sports authorities, in Table 3, a distinction is made between local sports authorities that report having initiatives to facilitate access for people in poverty (either by organising targeted activities or by facilitating access to non-targeted initiatives, or both) and local sports authorities which do not take any measures. Mean scores for the different barriers are compared between the two groups, in order to see which obstacles are most likely to impede the implementation of poverty policy. The results show that local sports authorities without poverty policy consider it less as a priority. This item yields the largest difference between the two groups. In other words, the absence of measures for facilitating sports for people in poverty is partly a matter of choice. Low priority was most frequently reported in small municipalities.

For both groups of sports authorities, with and without poverty policy, knowledge about dealing with people in poverty and knowing how to locate the people concerned are ranked highest as obstacles.



**Table 3: Difficulties for implementing local social sports policy, in mean scores on a 5-point scale (from totally disagree to totally agree), by the presence or absence of policy initiatives towards people in poverty**

<i><b>We experience difficulties to take up the accessibility of sports for people in poverty because...</b></i>	<b>Poverty policy</b>		<b>Sign.</b>
	<b>Yes (N=157)</b>	<b>No (N=36)</b>	
...we do not have enough knowledge about dealing with this target group	3.3	3.5	NS
...we do not know how to locate the people concerned	3.1	3.5	*
...there is no interest from this target group	2.9	3.0	NS
...with the same means we can attain more people from other groups	2.7	2.9	NS
...we cannot sufficiently count on other partners	2.7	3.1	*
...this topic is not a priority	2.6	3.3	***
...we have insufficient budget to make room for this	2.5	2.9	*

## **PARTNERSHIPS WITH THE SOCIAL SECTOR**

As explained above, local sports authorities are confronted with the expectation of establishing a local social sports policy in cooperation with other partners. Therefore, our third question is to what extent this occurs in practice. With regard to local social sports policy, and more specifically regarding poverty, there are two evident types of partners, i.e. the Public Centre for Social Welfare on the one hand, and poverty associations on the other hand. Both partnerships are investigated further based on the survey.

Starting with their (potential) partnership with the Public Centre for Social Welfare, local sports authorities were given two statements, the results of which are displayed in Table 4. With a mean score of 3.9, we observe there is a relatively high willingness on behalf of the local sports authorities to set up cooperation agreements with the Public Centre for Social Welfare. Over three quarters of the local sports authorities (76.3%) (totally) agree with the statement that they are in favour of setting up cooperation agreements. Less than four percent of local sports authorities (totally) disagreed. Yet, cooperation is not always easy. Only a little over one in two local sports authorities (51.9%) reports to have a good cooperation with the Public Centre for Social Welfare.

**Table 4: Partnership with the local Public Centre for Social Welfare on a 5-point scale (from totally disagree to totally agree) (N=186)**

<i><b>Item</b></i>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
The local sports authorities are in favour of setting up cooperation agreements with the Public Centre for Social Welfare	3.9	0.7
The local sports authorities have a good cooperation with the Public Centre for Social Welfare in their municipality	3.4	0.9

In addition to the Public Centre for Social Welfare, in many municipalities there is also one (or several) third sector organisation(s) that reunites and supports people in poverty. Four in ten local sports authorities (38.3%; N=74) state to cooperate with a third sector poverty association. In the remaining 62 percent of the municipalities, this is not the case. Local sports authorities that mentioned a cooperation with a poverty association, were subsequently asked about the type of cooperation. The results are shown in Table 5. As the number of cases is small here (with only 74 local sports authorities reporting a cooperation), we also mention the exact numbers, in addition to the percentages. The most common type of cooperation is the joint promotion of the sports on offer, which occurs in one in five municipalities (20.7%), followed by the joint organisation of sports activities (18.7%) and the exchange of information (16.1%). Overall, we observe that the level of cooperation with poverty associations is fairly limited.

**Table 5: Content of cooperation with third sector poverty associations**

<i>Item</i>	<b>Total % (N=193)</b>	<b>% among partner -ships (N=74)</b>	<b>N</b>
Joint promotion of the sports on offer	20.7	54.1	40
Joint organisation sport activities	18.7	48.6	36
Exchange of information	16.1	41.9	31
Financial support	14.0	36.5	27
Making available sports accommodation by the municipality	12.4	32.4	24
Joint organisation of sport events	11.4	29.7	22
Making available material /logistic support, for free	10.4	27.0	20
Fine-tuning of the sports on offer	7.8	20.3	15
Use of the accommodation of the poverty association	5.2	13.5	10
Exchange of staff and/or volunteers	2.1	5.4	4
Organisation of workshops/trainings for volunteers (f.i. trainers)	1.0	2.7	2
Making available material/logistic support, remunerated	0.5	1.4	1

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

As mentioned at the outset of this study, inclusive policies require the acknowledgement of social differences (Young, 2000). It means going beyond an “open access approach”, i.e. beyond stating that “everybody is welcome” (Waring & Mason, 2010). This study has shown that, compared to the previous measurement in 2010, there has been a large increase in the policy attention for people in poverty within the field of sports. The share of local sports authorities organising targeted activities for people in poverty has almost tripled. The initiatives taken at the Flemish policy level to encourage local sports authorities to invest in this group have not missed their effect. Yet, there is also another side to the story, as in one in five

municipalities, there is no local social sports policy towards people in poverty, while every municipality in Flanders is confronted with poverty at least to some extent (Marissal, May & Mesa Lombillo, 2013). The results have shown that a lack of knowledge and expertise in the field of poverty is the main barrier for local sports authorities to invest in local social sports policy to the benefit of people in poverty. A main reason for not developing a poverty policy in sports was also simply not considering it as a priority.

If no strong impetus is given, the situation is unlikely to change in the near future. The evolution of further decentralisation implies that the Flemish policy level renounces its ability to determine or directly affect the policies of local municipalities. Yet, they can still exert an influence, by providing information and raising awareness. If the opportunities for sports participation for people in poverty are to be enhanced, the Flemish government still has a vital role to fulfil in this regard. Policy incentives are needed to increase awareness and to improve understanding with regard to the complexity of poverty at local level. A concrete example of a policy strategy in this respect is to integrate the issue of poverty, and social vulnerability more generally, in initial as well as in follow-up trainings of people working in local sports authorities, and more generally, in educational programs of people who are involved in sports management and sports provision. In addition, it is important to continue to provide support to municipalities who are willing to invest in inclusion.

The results also indicate that local sports authorities rely on sports clubs only to a very limited extent to facilitate sports participation for people in poverty. Local sports authorities are more likely to cooperate with the Public Centre for Social Welfare, to organise specific activities, or to facilitate access to non-targeted own activities (financially or otherwise), but only a small minority of the local sports authorities invests in specific subsidisation for clubs to encourage “social” sports policy, or provides training or information to clubs. Inclusion is a process, resulting from a complex interplay of a variety of actors (Ponic & Frisby, 2010). From this perspective, it is important to involve sports clubs and other sports providers as well, together with partners who have expertise in working with people in poverty. However, if local sports authorities experience barriers to address the lower opportunities for participation of people in poverty in their own policy and provision, because they feel they lack the necessary knowledge and expertise for example, then encouraging other actors (i.e. sport clubs) to do so may be one step too far. This brings us back to the argument that some local sports authorities still need guidance and support in terms of their equality policy.

A third aim of this study was to investigate whether/how the expectation of accomplishing a local social sports policy with the aid of partnerships takes place in practice. The finding that the largest barrier in facilitating access to sports for people in poverty regards a lack of knowledge, adds to the importance of this question, as partners from the social sector, more particularly the Public Centres for Social Welfare and third sector poverty organisations do have the necessary expertise. Yet, “only” one in two local sports authorities stated to have a good cooperation with the Public Centre for Social Welfare in their municipality. In addition, “only” one in five local sports authorities cooperates with a local third sector poverty association for the promotion of the sports on offer, whereas one could consider this as a very basic, even minimal type of cooperation. This is somewhat striking as our findings also indicated that “not knowing how to locate the people concerned” is the second largest barrier for local sports authorities to facilitate sports opportunities for people in

poverty. In sum, these findings suggest that the sports sector and the social sector are still two “separate” worlds to a large extent, and bridging the gap remains a major challenge.

As Vettenburg, Brondeel, Gavray and Pauwels (2014) have argued, socially vulnerable people are often confronted with control and sanctions (i.e. the negative side) in their contact with social institutions, and this may hold for the contact with the Public Centre for Social Welfare as well. As clients in a Public Centre for Social Welfare, people in poverty are often in a very dependant position, to receive social assistance, debt mediation, etc. This is likely to affect the possibilities for the Public Centre for Social Welfare to facilitate and/or promote sports participation.

Membership of a third sector association is of a very different nature. It is purely voluntary, for example, and organisations take a participatory approach. Therefore, it is essential that also third sector associations are involved in facilitating and/or promoting sports. They present an additional asset, having another type of relation with the participants as compared to a public welfare institution.

Our study has some limitations. We did not ask local sports authorities for their main motivation to invest in the inclusion of people in poverty. This could be integrated in further research. Second, this research has quantified the relationships between local sports authorities and the Public Centres for Social Welfare or third sector poverty organisations, based on the responses of local sports authorities. To have a complete picture of the cooperation, it would be instructive to complement this information and ask the Public Centres for Social Welfare as well as the poverty associations similar questions. In addition, the data of our survey do not allow a deeper understanding of the difficulties involved. Further, most likely qualitative research, should investigate what the main challenges are in organising lasting and effective cooperation, and especially, how this can be facilitated. Once more, this might also be influenced by policy developments. The mindset and context for cooperation might for instance be influenced by the ongoing plans of the Flemish government to integrate the Public Centres for Social Welfare within the municipalities, which are nowadays two distinct institutions.

In his research on partnerships in the field of social exclusion, Geddes (2000) concluded that “the dominant practice of local partnership – as opposed to some of its rhetoric – enshrines elitist, neocorporatist or neopluralist principles, and excludes or marginalizes more radical egalitarian and solidaristic possibilities” (p.797). Based on their study on race equality and leisure policy discourses in Scottish local authorities, Swinney and Horne (2005) concluded that the extent to which the “ethos of equality” had permeated the local authorities (beyond paying lip service) remained uneven. This brings us to a third limitation of this study. In the current research, we have investigated to what extent local sports authorities currently take initiatives towards people in poverty, and to what extent they accomplish this in cooperation with partners from the social sector. However, we did not dwell on the type of initiatives, nor on the broader approach taken. This could not be evaluated based on our data. Further research should especially focus on the underlying assumptions of current inclusion policies towards people in poverty, and their veracity, for example concerning the reasons for non-participation.

Along the same line, as a final remark, we want to stress the importance of the content of the policy. In order to create fair opportunities in sports, it is necessary to adapt initiatives taken to the needs of the people concerned. As also Geldof and

Driessens (2006) have argued, it is not enough to stimulate people in poverty, or more generally, people in a socially disadvantaged situation, to take part in the current sports offer, or to facilitate access, taking the current organisation of sports opportunities for granted. A more socially “just” sports sector requires local sports authorities and their partners to actively listen to the people who are currently staying on the side line, and where necessary, to rethink sports opportunities in response to their actual needs.

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